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Forbes, Esther
Anne Douglas
Sedgwick

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ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK



AN INTERVIEW BY ESTHER FORBES
TOGETHER WITH SOME CRITICAL
COMMENTS AND A BIBLIOGRAPHY

Syracuse, N.Y.
PAI. MAN 21, 1908

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK

An Interview
by
ESTHER FORBES

And Appreciations by
WILLIAM LYON PHELPS
DOROTHY CANFIELD
HUGH WALPOLE
AND OTHERS



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'Why know Anne Douglas Sedgwick?

'Because no one now writing understands men and women better, and no one else now writing portrays a man or woman with such completeness.

'She turns her people inside out, like gloves — and she does it slowly, delicately, sympathetically, without hurting them, without their splitting along the seams.'

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THE SHORTER CATECHISM OF ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK

BY ESTHER FORBES

Author of 'O Genteel Lady!'

THE half-light closed around the hedge and arbor of the English garden; the orchard beyond us sharpened into a purple silhouette against the sunset. She sat serene and upright by the tea-table like a Dresden goddess. The coil of prematurely white hair, the purple eyes, the pink and white smoothness of her moulded features, lent her a statuesque quality which was sweetly dispelled by her smile and by the gentle irony of her conversation. We had been discussing 'The Little French Girl'; and from this we went backwards and forwards over the surface of Mrs. de Sélincourt's life, personal and literary, I asking the questions and the lady giving answer. But my questions which elicited their charming replies and the little prods I gave to keep the bright stream flowing shall be reduced to their minimum.

Q. What of your childhood?

A. My childhood, you know, was spent in England where I went at nine years, so that the most definite impressions of my early years are of the London that I try to evoke in the first chapter of 'Tante' — the London of Gilbert and Sullivan operas, Langtry, buns, hansom cabs and fogs; walks with a governess in Rotten Row and frequent visits to the National Gallery and the Old South Kensington Museum.

Q. And so in comparison — ?

A. Yes, in comparison my memories of New York and Irvington-on-Hudson, where I lived till I was taken to England, are dim. I see a starry, scintillating sky on a snowy night, a Christmas tree, and the orchards and gardens where my sisters and I played in summer, but nothing distinctive or typical. Much clearer are the pictures of a visit to Southern Ohio, to my mother's family, during the life in England, and very different are they from the pictures of the Middle West that I find in modern American novels! Sobriety, sweetness, tradition, are the things that best fit my memories of my grandfather's and grandmother's home, an Emersonian flavour, a love of books and of nature. I spent hours in reading in the library where *Memoirs de Grammont* lurked, forbidden on the far, high shelves, and bound volumes of Addison's 'Spectator' and Littell's 'Living Age.' I remember being taken by our grandfather, one night, to watch by lantern-light the emerging from its case of a locust, frail, green, exquisite, and the immense, beautiful Catalpa tree that showered its white and pink flowers on the roofs of the verandas. There were dear old negro servants too, and I have always had, because of my memory of them, a great tenderness for that race. Then at fourteen it was England again, and at eighteen, Paris.

Q. You studied painting, I believe. Did this training help you as a writer?

A. I studied for five years in Paris, never working very hard, I fear, and with no special talent, though I did exhibit a pleasant little portrait of my sister in the Champs de Mars Salon, but I do not know that my artistic training affected my writing. I turned to writing quite by accident, as it were. I had always

told long continued stories to my sisters and those developed later into novels, and it was one of them, 'The Dull Miss Archinard' (a very feeble little affair that I trust no one will ever wish to re-read), that was shown by my father to a publisher.

Q. When did you next see America?

A. I did not return to America till I was twenty-eight — alas! so long ago. But I paid two visits of six months each, seeing America with a foreigner's eyes, it may be, but with an American heart.

New York, Boston, Washington, Southern Ohio again, and the beautiful New England country — impressions are far too many, but the main one was of exhilaration and happiness. I had made American friends over here, but my visits added, of course, a new world of people to my knowledge, and almost always I find all Americans lovable. I am, of course, especially interested in the subject of the American in Europe, as Henry James was; and this is perhaps why I am so often spoken of as his disciple (for all my admiration of him, I have never thought of myself in that category). I am especially interested in types whose conduct and differences make them stand out against the European background, types like darling little Franklin Winslow Kane or Adrienne Toner.

Q. Tell me about the books you read — Henry James, for instance? I have often heard him referred to as an 'influence' on your style.

A. I read Henry James with delight, and Meredith with delight mingled with exasperation during all my early years, but they have never been my favorite novelists. The Russians have always been that, since I first read 'La Guerre et la Paix' (I much prefer them all in French) at the age of eighteen.

Q. I read once in a Chicago paper that this is the book of all others you would rather have written. 'Alice in Wonderland' came second.

A. Indeed I have not said or did not mean to say 'La Guerre et la Paix' is the novel I would most have wished to write! I could never think of myself in that grandiose category. It is my favorite novel, a very different thing, and I can as little think of the world without a Bible as without 'Alice in Wonderland' and 'Through the Looking Glass,' enchanting, adorable, marvelous books. Surely they furnish life as no others do except the Bible.

Q. And the moderns?

A. Of modern American novelists I think that my favorite is Willa Cather. 'A Lost Lady' I thought a very beautiful book, and I liked 'One of Ours' very much too, though it is less achieved, I thought. One finds a sober, magnanimous outlook in her books. I like Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry and some of Conrad Aiken's (I speak as the memory comes to me) — a lovely thing about Senlin making his morning toilette, and the Chinaberry tree comes to me. 'The Morning Song of Senlin,' and I must not forget Vachel Lindsay's 'Santa Fé Trail' and the 'Chinese Nightingale,' both of which moved me very much.

Q. Have you rules for novel writing? Any credo?

A. I can't think of any rule in regard to novel-writing that I could formulate. Life — more abundant life — is all that one can ask of a novel and it is because in Tolstoi the sense of life's depth and abundance is given so matchlessly that I care for him so much. Dostoievski is as great, and perhaps more sublime, but he does not affect one as having the same security of outlook.

A novel should have this security and be sober and beautiful if possible. I care very much for form and unity, but I am aware that they are difficult to perceive in Tolstoi. And a novel should not be sentimental, or affected or dull. That is all that I can find to say of the should and should not.

Q. How do you do your work?

A. My books always start with people, imaginary always, yet often to be traced to past memories. I usually see their faces very clearly. The background rises to fit them and the situation to express them. I never begin with a biographical sketch. I have the story as a whole in my mind before I begin, and I usually start with the first chapter and write straight through, going back in loops, as it were, to rewrite, and forward to grasp essential scenes that often rise up dominantly and can't wait till their time comes. The key scenes are usually written before the book really ends, and give me points to work towards. I write and rewrite three or four times and, of course, the book is often greatly altered before I am finally satisfied that I have done with my idea all that I can do.

Q. When and where do you do your writing?

A. I write in the mornings, as a rule, for two or three hours, and since my marriage, at my home here in the country, at a large table, looking out at the garden. I confess that I often waste long moments in watching the birds when I should be working.

Q. This must be a delightful place here in the Cotswold either to work or to amuse one's self.

A. I am very fond of country life, all the year round, but I neither hunt nor play tennis! I greatly enjoy

singing in our village Choral Society, of which my husband is the conductor. We are sixty members and often give orchestral concerts with an Oxford orchestra to help us. We have given Brahms's Requiem and Hayden's Creation and Bach's Christmas Oratorio, among other things, and to sing in this great splendor of sound is one of my delights, though I have no voice to speak of.

I am fond of seeing my friends, here and in London, where I go frequently, as all my family lives there. Birds, I suppose, are my hobby. I long to know American birds as well as I do English ones and so cross-question any American friend who takes an interest in them, very, very closely. I feel that I should recognize a good many of them from reading about them so much. And if birds are my hobby, my passion is my little dog, a marvelous little 'Pom' who hunts across the fields like a terrier and is yet the most sensitive, delicate, and exquisite of creatures. But I adore all animals.

Q. And your next book, Mrs. de Sélincourt? Have your plans matured yet?

A. I have very few ideas, perhaps one in two years. But it rather feels as if the next novel would be about France again. I was saturated with France during the three years of the war that we were there (it was not in our hospital, as was magnificently said in an article, but in a hospital organized by friends of ours) and we have often returned there since the war. My husband and I think France the most beautiful country in the world, but I confess that one may have moments of monotony between Calais and Paris, and Paris and Bordeaux! My mind is still very full of France and I have always read a great deal of French and think as easily in French as in English (although

my accent and often my genders leave much to be desired!) so that the contrasts and clashes between English and French life are still uppermost in my mind.

I rose to go, but paused to thank Mrs. de Sélincourt for her courtesy and to offer my congratulations not only on her 'Little French Girl' but on the uniform edition of her works which I understand is being prepared in the United States. A 'definitive edition'? How many authors have dreamed of seeing their works thus gathered together? It is in a way one of the most telling tributes to literary fame.

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK — AMERICAN NOVELIST

By WILLIAM LYON PHELPS

[Extracts reprinted from *The Forum*]

I CALL Anne Sedgwick an American novelist, because she was born of American parents, and first opened her eyes in Englewood, New Jersey. There are other reasons why she may be called an American, but the above statement seems sufficiently to establish the fact. At the age of nine, she went to Paris, studied painting, and had the pleasure of seeing some of her work exhibited; this education in both France and Art was supplemented by marriage and residence in England; by that admirable gift of selection so noticeable in her style, she seems in her life to have infallibly chosen the best elements in all three countries. It is well, however, to insist that she is an American, for we need her name.

Although she had written a number of interesting novels, it was not until the year 1911 that she attracted general attention. This was by the publication of 'Tante,' which scored a sensational success, but which, like nearly all best sellers, passed in a few years out of sight and out of mind. Apart from the material rewards of that book, its most fortunate result was that it attracted many readers to the author, so that she has ever since had a constituency who read everything she writes: who know what they like and why they like it.

Her novel, 'The Encounter,' published just as the Great War broke out, was a prophetic commentary on its causes and on the various peoples engaged in it. For Nietzsche is one of the leading characters; and he and his philosophy triumph until they meet something stronger in the person of a cripple, who represents Christian ideas, which have thus far not influenced the foreign policy of any nation in the world. In 'The Encounter' Ludwig (Nietzsche) insists that Strength is the highest good; the cripple, Conrad, replies that Goodness is the highest strength.

Two years ago, Anne Sedgwick published a novel, '*Adrienne Toner*', describing the career of a rich young American girl in England and on the Continent during the war. International relations have always interested our author, and nearly every one of her books may be taken partly as an attempt to draw nations together, to annihilate silly prejudices, and to help the people of any country to understand the best qualities in foreigners.

Anne Sedgwick, in '*The Little French Girl*', has a subject which she treats both artistically and authoritatively. She knows what she is writing about, and one can trust her, as one trusts an engineer when he is talking about bridges. This is her specialty, — the differences most noticeable in the character of the French as compared with that of the English. No decision is rendered; it is apparently a draw. The best solution of whatever difficulty there may be is in marriage.

'*The Little French Girl*' fulfills my conception of a novel, because it is a good story well told. There is a real plot, with the old-fashioned and ever-interesting elements of suspense. There are three families, two in England, and one in France; every individual member is cleanly and sharply presented.

The conversations, the descriptions, and the purely meditative passages all rise from honest thinking, for Anne Sedgwick has never shirked that hardest of all work. The novel is so rich in thought that it is quite impossible to read it rapidly, and yet every page fills the reader with desire for the next. One cannot skip paragraphs, but one can, and does, read with steady enjoyment, and with frequent pauses to think of some particularly challenging idea. . . .

Books live, if they live at all, because of their style. Anne Sedgwick knows how to write the English language in a manner to please the most fastidious judge.

Apart from the beauty and dignity and distinction of its literary style, there are two reasons why this book rises automatically toward the top. One reason is the author's mind,

the other is her heart. There are living American novelists whose works we read with pleasure; we know in advance they will not disappoint us; we are grateful for the happiness they give us. But the difference between their work and the work of Anne Sedgwick is this: they satisfy our curiosity, and she stimulates it; they lull our thoughts, she quickens them. . . . Anne Sedgwick's novels, and particularly '*The Little French Girl*,' challenge us on every page. Is it true? Is it true? and if so, what of it?

On this side of her art she is most similar to Edith Wharton, as she is in her command of language. From another point of view it will be seen that she is resembled by one who might be proud to be her disciple, even as she is the disciple of Henry James. I mean Dorothy Canfield. Both Anne Sedgwick and Dorothy Canfield are deeply and truly spiritual. The imponderable values are there; judgment of the worth of national and individual character, of success in life, is invariably based on a spiritual standard. It is because we feel in the work of Anne Sedgwick the constant presence of spiritual forces, which to so many writers do not even exist, that her appeal, while human and contemporary, is to elements deeper and higher than mere sense-satisfaction. She touches notes that are not within the range of many of our popular writers. It is this triple combination that places Anne Sedgwick in the foremost rank of living novelists: her consummate art, her challenging mentality, and her spiritual force.

THE OLD COUNTESS

ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK'S LATEST BOOK

For twenty years Anne Douglas Sedgwick has held a position of distinguished preëminence among the novelists of England and America. 'Tante' and 'Adrienne Tomer' were among the so-called 'best sellers.' Then came 'The Little French Girl.' With unerring and exquisite art, but with new warmth and richness, Mrs. de Sélincourt told the story of Alix Vervier. Critics everywhere pronounced it one of the outstanding achievements in modern English fiction; the novel-reading public concurred,—and more than a quarter million copies were sold. Now after two years and a half of characteristic brooding and writing, revising and polishing, Mrs. de Sélincourt gives to the world another great novel,—one more intense and poignant, more moving and memorable than any she has done before.

The scene and the events she chronicles lie wholly in the France that she knows and loves. In the little village of Buissac, in the Dordogne, the four chief persons of the tale come together: the Old Countess, gay, wicked, intriguing, full of amorous memories, still avid of love; Dick Graham, brilliant, brusque, vital English painter; Jill, his wife, fresh and charming; and finally, most compelling of all, Marthe Ludérac, the French girl whose childhood has been darkened by a crime d'amour, whose girlhood is fatally entangled with the fading years of the Old Countess, yet who is herself the supreme embodiment of beauty, force, and noble passion.

As always in Anne Douglas Sedgwick's books, the narrative flows with an even and beautiful speed, guided by intimate and vivid observation, lighted by the play of delicate humor, and in 'The Old Countess' she keeps steadily before us both the subtle spiritual, and the stark physical realities of modern life. We assist at a series of events which progress irresistibly from one dramatic climax to another. At the end we are left in that mood of spent emotion, of enlarged vision, which is the deepest, most enduring pleasure that literature has to give.

THE LITTLE FRENCH GIRL

Extracts from a review by
DOROTHY CANFIELD
in *The Saturday Review of Literature*

Excellently well done as are the characterizations of the finely observed people in the book, it is as a study of French ways and English ways that the book is most unusual. Mrs. de Sélincourt has given us beautiful characterizations before, in many of her firm, delicate stories. But I cannot now remember that any one has ever before given us such an honorable and veracious study of national traits. As a rule, nothing more completely misrepresents a nation than a forthright, conscientious study of its national traits. But Anne Douglas Sedgwick's approach is not forthright and heavy. It is oblique and glancing. She is telling, first of all, a story about how a pungently charming French girl fell in love with an intelligent and magnanimous Englishman. To do this she found it necessary to paint a portrait of the two national backgrounds and traditions which created those two human souls.

It will be said of this book that 'only an author who has lived much in France could have written it.' But alas! there are innumerable authors who could have lived endlessly in France without being able to create anything with a tenth part of the fairness and truth of this study, not to mention the brilliant beauty of the writing of it. The point is, not merely that the author has lived much in France, but that she has turned on French landscape, habits, traditions and ideals, the same discriminating and intelligent gaze which has, from the first, made her books so comforting to her readers. With the passage of years, the intelligence of this scrutiny and the Attic grace of her style, have been deepened by a richer understanding, a more warm-hearted sympathy with different varieties of the human race, and this accounts for the really extraordinary perfection of the resemblance of these two portraits to the French and English souls which they portray.

ADRIENNE TONER

'It is not often that a novel of so fine a beauty is written. It has depth and tenderness, and it presents life as something worth living, experience as something worth meeting. It is at the furthest possible remove from the sentimental, the sweet, the glad book, and is worth a million of these in its sane and sound optimism.' — HILDEGARDE HAWTHORNE in *The New York Herald*.

'A very great and significant book, a most important event in English and American letters. The story is fascinating, but the great power of the book seems to me to be its spiritual power. And the craftsmanship is so exquisite that in itself it casts a spell.' — ZONA GALE.

"Adrienne Toner" is a very pearl of a novel.' — KATE DOUGLAS WIGGIN.

THE NEST

'These five short stories have that literary quality which may entitle them to perennial recognition. The author writes with a delicacy and a deftness that are given to the comparatively few. She pierces with insight and acumen to the roots and sources of human conduct, and yet never lets her own personality grow obtrusive and never becomes didactic.' — STANTON A. COBLENTZ in *The Saturday Review of Literature*.

THE THIRD WINDOW

'Anne Douglas Sedgwick began her career as a painter. She learned to see life as a series of pictures — and she embodies them with the finish of Watteau and the charm of Corot. The "third window" is a fit frame for these pictures, and to watch them from it is to have an exquisite and unusual pleasure.' — HELOISE E. HERSEY in *The Atlantic Monthly*.

'Indeed "The Third Window" is one of those very rare books which are touchstones of a reader's sensitiveness and receptivity.' — LLEWELLYN JONES in *The Chicago Post*.

FRANKLIN WINSLOW KANE

'FRANKLIN WINSLOW KANE seems to me the best of all Mrs. de Sélincourt's books and in my humble opinion better a good deal than this last successful one. It is an unforgettable book because it enshrines a beautiful character who is never betrayed by sentimentality, who is gentle without being effeminate, and brave without being arrogant. I have had a kind of personal feeling about Franklin ever since I first met him. I remember him as I do very few characters in modern fiction. The book is Franklin and Franklin is the book, and it seems to me that by the creation of this character Mrs. de Sélincourt will live. He will be passed on from friend to friend and handed down as a living witness of what the twentieth century could produce in the way of gentlemen when it was put to it.' — HUGH WALPOLE.

A FOUNTAIN SEALED

'It is marked by good sense throughout. It is a firm, stable, reasonable plot. It needs no ingenuity, no afterthought, no "deus ex machina" to come to its rescue. It moves onward with a serene, steady, orderly progress. The reign of law, of wise law, is apparent. The plot is singularly simple, and yet produces a rich effect. Anne Douglas Sedgwick has the reins always taut, she is a capital whip, holds her scenes well in hand and drives them where she wishes.' — HENRY DWIGHT SEDGWICK in *The New American Type*.

CHRISTMAS ROSES

'It has been frequently noted in the past that Anne Douglas Sedgwick is one of the few writers to whose work the term distinction may be fittingly applied. It is marked by a fineness, a finish, which few authors can achieve. Her understanding of character, her appreciation of beauty in all its forms, her ability to work quietly and effectively, yet with dramatic intensity, all make up the sum total of the satisfaction which we find here.' — DOROTHEA LAWRENCE MANN in *The Boston Evening Transcript*.

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1908 AMABEL CHANNICE
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1911 TANTE
1912 THE NEST
1914 THE ENCOUNTER
1918 A CHILDHOOD IN BRITTANY EIGHTY YEARS
AGO
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